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Ian McCready Flora

University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, ian.flora@gmail.com

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Aristotle on [Part of] the Difference between Belief and Imagination

Ian Flora *University of Michigan — Ann Arbor*

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I. Introduction

In book 3, chapter 3 of his *On the Soul*, Aristotle gives several arguments meant to demonstrate the type non-identity of belief and imagination.¹ Each of these arguments rewards study, but this discussion will focus on one in particular, perhaps the most puzzling. The argument concerns the relation between truth and control. Belief is connected with truth and falsehood in a way that imagination is not, and that in turn means that we can control what we imagine in a way that we cannot control what we believe. Here is Aristotle's argument in full:

(1) It's clear as well that it [sc. imagination] is not the same thing as belief. For that particular affection is up to us, whenever we want (since it's possible to produce [sc. images] before one's eyes, like those forming mental images and putting them into mnemonic systems), while forming a belief is not up to us: for it must either be true or false. (*De Anima* 3.3.427b16-20)²

Aristotle's reasoning is, to put it mildly, lacunose. The reason (*gar*) that belief is not under our control (up to us, or *eph' êmin*) is that it must either be true or false. He declines, however, to say what the connection is between truth and control. My project in what follows is to try to make sense of this argument. There is a family of interpretation which I call the "traditional reading."³ On this reading, belief is not up to us in virtue of its simply having a truth value. This interpretation proves inadequate, and I propose in its place that belief, for Aristotle, has a *normative* connection to truth and falsehood. This connection imposes restrictions on belief formation which render belief not up to us.

II. Imagination and "Mental Command"

When Aristotle says that imagination is up to us "whenever we want," there is reason to

1 Imagination, here and throughout, translates the Greek word *phantasia*. The translation, though not always felicitous, is conventional. I have chosen it over the other conventional translation—"appearance"—because it seems in this particular argument as though Aristotle is referring to an application of *phantasia* which bears a close resemblance to our modern notion of "imagination," i.e. the more or less free play of mental imagery. This *pace* Freudenthal (1863, pp. 28-29), and in agreement with Schofield (1992, pp. 251-252)

2 All translations are my own. In passage (1), I accept the conventional rendering of the last phrase, though I believe it is better translated differently. I do this in order to discuss the traditional reading, and will propose my own rendering in section IV.

3 One finds versions of this reading in Themistius (*Paraphrasis* 88.38-40), Philoponus (*in de An.* 493.10-2), Simplicius (*in de An.* 206.30-5), Freudenthal (1863, pp. 11-13), Rodier (1900, pp. ii.412-ii.413), Hicks (1907, pp. 458-459), Hamlyn (1968, pp. 130-131), Wedin (1984, p. 76) and Heil (2003, p. 324), (Barnes, 2006, pp. 195-197). Alexander of Aphrodisias, in his discussion of the difference between belief and imagination (*De Anima* 67.12-25), provides no paraphrase of this particular argument, though he seems to agree with its premises: see *in Topica* 223.7-8, on which see Barnes (2006, pp. 201-202).

think that he means that we control both what we imagine as well as when we imagine.⁴ It is difficult to make sense of the view that, though we can make ourselves imagine something, we have no control over what that something is. Indeed, the example Aristotle cites (building a mnemonic system) suggests that control over content is included in control over initiation.⁵ Aristotle describes people making mnemonics as “producing images” (*eidôlopoiountes*) and placing them (*tithemenoi*) in particular places. The cited activities imply production and direction, which in turn imply an element of control.

This argument leaves two points of detail unspecified. First is the range of content which we are able to imagine. Aristotle seems committed to the idea that the content available to a subject supervenes on what that subject has retained from perception.⁶ There are, however, many possible views about what operations—such as combination, separation, etc.—are possible through imagination. For the present, we need not pursue this issue. We need only observe that we can imagine what we want, for some range of content. The second point concerns initiation. It is not the case, for Aristotle, that we imagine only when we want to. Imagination accompanies perception, which is not up to us, and it also occurs when we are asleep, and have no chance to stop it.⁷ Passage (1) says nothing to contradict this. Aristotle claims only that we can imagine things when we want to, not that we imagine *only* when we want to.⁸ As in the first case, it is not necessary for us to specify in detail the range of circumstances under which we control the imagination. It is sufficient to point out that there is such a range. If we put together the results of the two foregoing discussions, we see that Aristotle is committed to the following schema in the case of imagination:

Mental Command: If S wants to x with content p at t, then S x’s with content p at t

The first half of passage (1) commits Aristotle to all instances of Mental Command when x = imagination, and the variables p and t are bound with appropriate quantifiers.⁹

Some commentators who subscribe to the traditional reading make no explicit remarks about control over content.¹⁰ It is nevertheless an essential clarification because it renders the structure of Aristotle’s argument more perspicuous. Aristotle says that

4 In ancient commentators, this view is most explicit in Themistius (88.36-7): “for it is possible (for us) to fashion before our eyes *by choice* (*proelomenous*) now a horse, now a dog, now whatever.” The modern exemplar is Hicks (1907, p. 458): “We are free to picture *this or that* to ourselves in thought, whenever we please...”

5 Aristotle makes this explicit also in *On Memory and Recollection* 2.451b31-2, where he says that we seek a suitable starting-point for our search.

6 I get this from three passages. At *On the Soul* 3.3.428b11-3, Aristotle claims that imagination does not happen without perception. *Posterior Analytics* 2.19.100a3 *et seq.* commits Aristotle to the notion that retaining perceptual content is the basis of all further mental operations. Last, Aristotle refers to imagination once as a decaying sense impression (*Rhetoric* 1.11.1370a28-30). All of these imply that what can be imagined depends, in some way, on what has been perceived.

7 Accompanying perception: *On the Soul* 3.3.428b11-16; Occurring during sleep: *On Dreams* 1.459a15-24.

8 Philoponus (*in De Anima* 492.33-493.4) rebuts the same objection (i.e. that we do not always control our imaginings), and Hicks (1907, p. 459) notices that Aristotle is not committed to the stronger thesis.

9 I think that this schema can apply even to states of the soul that bear content in a slightly less obvious way than belief and imagination. Practical wisdom and virtue, for instance, do not take a propositional complement in ascription: it makes little sense to say “S has *phronêsis* that p.” Aristotle is clear, however, that possessing practical wisdom and virtue implies apprehending certain content (e.g. *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.9.1142b31-3, 7.8.1151a17-9). See also (Taylor, 1990, p. 118).

10 Philoponus, Freudenthal and Hamlyn do not devote any time to it.

imagination is up to us because it satisfies Mental Command. We might conclude, then, that satisfying Mental Command is a sufficient condition for a mental state to be up to us. When we put it this way, the problem becomes obvious: Aristotle makes no reference to anything like Mental Command in his claim that belief is not up to us. He seems to refer instead to a characteristic of belief, namely that it implicates truth and falsehood. The task before us, then, is to figure out the connection, as Aristotle sees it, between belief's relation to the truth and our lack of control over what and when we believe.

III. *Thin Truth-aptness: The Traditional Reading*

According to the traditional reading, belief is not up to us because every belief has a truth-value, i.e. is either true or false. Call this relationship to truth and falsehood *thin truth-aptness*. It says nothing about the role truth plays in the mental state's function. If one takes the argument this way, one encounters straightforward contradictions with Aristotle's other apparent views. The most obvious problem is that imagination is also thinly truth-apt.¹¹ Aristotle compares imagination to belief for the very reason that both can be either true or false (cf. *On the Soul* 3.3.428a16-8). It is puzzling, then, why Aristotle would distinguish them along the very same lines he uses to warrant their comparison. Some who notice this conclude that Aristotle's argument is not cogent.¹² In addition to imagination, supposition (*hupolēpsis*) is also either true or false. When we suppose, we either suppose something true or something false. Nonetheless, we can suppose that p if we want to, even when we know that p is false.¹³ Supposition, then, is up to us, but also thinly truth-apt.

There are ways to defend the thin interpretation of the argument. It is worthwhile to go over a representative sample of such defenses and see the difficulties that arise for them. First, we might think that belief is not up to us because we cannot control the truth value that any given belief has.¹⁴ Simplicius defends this idea when he writes about passage (1):

(2) Assent is not only an understanding of what comes upon us, but also a judgment along the lines of truth and falsehood. But truth and falsehood

11 Aristotle says this all over the place. Foremost is *On the Soul* 428a3, where says that we speak truly or falsely "in accordance with imagination." See also *De Anima* 3.3.428a12, where he says that *phantasia* is, for the most part, false; 428a18, where he says that, as opposed to knowledge (*epistēmē*), *phantasia* can also be false; and 428b18, which flatly states that *phantasia* can be true and false.

12 Barnes, for example says that Aristotle's argument "won't wash" and goes on to say "what I fantasize either holds true or (more probably) holds false" (2006, p. 196). Freudenthal calls the Aristotle's antithesis "false" because "*phantasia*, just like belief, is subject to the criterion of truth and falsehood" (1863, p. 11).

13 There are two passages that serve as evidence that Aristotle has something like this notion of "entertaining a view." The first is *Metaphysics* 4.5.1010b10-2: "For it is clear that they do not think this: no one who's in Libya but supposes one night that he is in Athens, makes his way toward the Odeon." The second is *Topics* 4.5.125b35-7: "by the same token neither is conviction supposition; for it is possible for someone to have a supposition but not be convinced of it, but this is not possible if conviction is a kind of supposition." *Hupolēpsis* does not always designate this kind of state, by the way; it has a very broad semantic field.

14 For modern proponents, see Hicks (1907, p. 459) and Heil (2003, p. 324). Heil's remarks contains a perspicuous instance of the invalid inference which I discuss below in the main text: "Presumably he means that it is not up to us to decide the truth-value of our beliefs (the facts decide that for us), whereas it is in our control to conjure up a true or false appearance" (2003, p. 324n17).

lie in agreement and disagreement with external affairs (*ta pragmata*), and those are not up to us. (*in De An.* 206.31-5)

This interpretation fills in Aristotle's reasoning like so: beliefs must have truth values. These truth values are set by agreement or disagreement with external affairs (*ta pragmata*). These external affairs are not under our control, so it follows that the truth value of our beliefs is not under our control.¹⁵ We cannot choose whether to have a false or a true belief. Belief, therefore, is not up to us.

One reason to be suspicious of this interpretation is that it gives us no reason even to think that belief fails to satisfy Mental Command. It may be the case that, for any content *p*, it is not up to us whether a belief that *p* is true or false. It does not follow from this, however, that we cannot choose to believe that *p*, whatever truth value that belief might have. Satisfying Mental Command is sufficient for a mental state to be up to us, so this interpretation gives us no reason to think belief is not up to us. Explaining this claim, however, was our purpose in the first place. This contradiction is reason to reject the reading. One might respond by saying that the truth and falsehood of the belief is part of its *content*. In that case, inability to decide the truth-value would imply inability to choose the content, and so belief would fail to satisfy Mental Command. This response fails, however, because were it true, it would entail that imagination does not satisfy Mental Command. Grant that truth and falsehood are fixed by agreement or disagreement with the facts. There is no reason not to think that the truth value of imagination is fixed in exactly the same way.¹⁶ Facts are no more up to us in the case of imagination than in the case of belief. If belief is not up to us because we cannot control its truth-value, then it follows that imagination is not up to us for the very same reason. This interpretation causes Aristotle's argument to be flawed in an obvious enough way that I am reluctant to ascribe it to him if there are other options.

A second interpretation holds that belief is not up to us because we are psychologically compelled to believe certain things and reject others. Themistius holds such a view; we cannot decide what to believe because the external world compels us:

(3) But it is not possible to grasp (*hupolabein*) and judge (*krinai*) whatever we may choose about something; rather, what seems (*dokoun*) obvious compels us. For we are not able withhold denial in the face of something obviously false, but rather it is necessary to assent to the fact that twice two is four, whether we want to or not. (*Paraphrase* 88.38 - 89.1)

If something seems evidently false to us, we cannot help but reject it. Nor can we withhold assent from what seems evident to us:

(4) We are not in command over assenting within ourselves or denying, but rather those are involuntary (*akousia*) affections of the soul. For what seems obvious drags the soul into assent, what seems obviously false drags it into denial, and what is unclear how it stands drags it into

¹⁵ We are, of course, capable of influencing the world in various ways with our actions, and Simplicius was no doubt aware of that. When he says that "what happens is not up to us," I take him to mean that we do not control them by way of having certain beliefs about them.

¹⁶ This is true even if the operative notion of truth for imagination is truth-of, rather than propositional truth. See Wedin (1984, pp. 77-79) for the distinction. The basic notion of matching-up is, I think, present in both propositional truth and truth-of, so the latter requires no importantly different account. See also Moreau (1961, pp. 23-26) for a discussion of truth which does not involve predication (and therefore does not involve propositions), though Moreau's subject is perception and not imagination proper.

uncertainty. (*Paraphrase* 89.6-10).

Belief is not up to us because our beliefs cannot conflict with what we take to be evident. Imagination, by contrast, has not such restriction. This interpretation gives Aristotle's reasoning the following form: at any time *t*, our beliefs are wholly determined by what seems obvious to us at *t*. We can want to believe that *p*, but if it is not obvious to us that *p*, then we will either reject *p* or suspend our judgment.

This interpretation makes it clear why belief fails to satisfy Mental Command. Belief, according to Themistius, is independent of our desires at any given time. The interpretation is not, however, a viable way to fill in Aristotle's reasoning. This is because, though satisfying Mental Command is a sufficient condition for a mental state to be up to us, it is not a necessary condition. Showing that a mental state fails to satisfy it will not, therefore, guarantee that it is not up to us.

Aristotle is committed to the view that certain states which violate Mental Command are nonetheless up to us. In Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle claims that our settled states of character are up to us:

(5) Excellence is also up to us, and so too is defectiveness. For if it is up to us to act, then it is also up to us not to act, and vice versa. (*Nicomachean Ethics* 3.5.1113b6-8)

We form character gradually through our actions. We do not become brave by performing a single brave action, but rather through a process of habituation.¹⁷ Habits, once acquired, are very difficult to change. Excellence of character, therefore, fails to satisfy Mental Command. It is not the case that wanting to have a virtue at time *t* makes us virtuous at that time. Yet our states of character, according to Aristotle, are up to us. Satisfying Mental Command, then, is not a necessary condition for a state to be up to us. Being unable to form beliefs contrary to what is apparent, therefore, does not imply that belief is not up to us. It seems possible, for instance, to undertake a program of self-brainwashing, to get oneself to accept something or see something as obvious which one otherwise would not. Themistius' interpretation requires that this be psychologically impossible. I have found nothing that commits Aristotle to a thesis of that sort, and it seems independently implausible besides. The general point is that faculties and states can be in our power without being at our immediate and fail-safe command. On this reading, then, Aristotle's reasoning in passage (1) remains mysterious, which is reason to reject the reading.

A third way of reading the argument is provided by Rodier¹⁸ in response to an allegation by Freudenthal that Aristotle's argument is invalid. For Rodier, the relevant difference is that belief *must* be true or false, which for him implies that imagination need not have a truth value. He cites a passage from *On Memory and Recollection* which, he claims, provides criteria for when imagination has a truth value and when it does not.¹⁹ There are two ways to take any given mental image (*phantasma*): either simply as an image, referring to nothing beyond itself, or as a likeness of something else. In the latter role, it becomes a representation, and only then does it have a part in truth or falsehood.²⁰

17 Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics*. 2.1.1103a16-8, a23-5, b1-2, 3.5.1114a9-10.

18 (1900, pp. ii.412-ii.413)

19 *On Memory and Recollection* 1.450b20-1a6. The passage is too long to quote in the main body. What follows is a paraphrase according to Rodier's interpretation.

20 The view seems to imply that, when we do not take an image to be a likeness of some existent thing, it

Since we need not take all of our imaginings to fit the world in some way, they are up to us. We do not have a similar choice about how to take our beliefs. Belief, therefore, is not up to us.

This cannot be the correct way to fill in Aristotle's reasoning because it implies that imagination is not up to us, contrary to Aristotle's claim in passage (1). To see why, consider the two ways Aristotle says we might make use of a mental image (*phantasma*). Call the first a *truth-apt imagination* and the other *non-truth-apt imagination*. According to the interpretation under discussion, imagination is up to us because it can be non-truth-apt whenever we want it to be. If this is what makes imagination up to us, however, then truth-apt imagination is not up to us. This is because truth-apt imagination must be either true or false, or else it would be non-truth-apt imagination. It follows by the argument in passage (1) that truth-apt imagination is not up to us.

A defender of this interpretation might respond that this is of little importance, provided that some kind of imagination is up to us. If not belief is up to us, but some imagination is, then that is enough to establish their type non-identity, which was Aristotle's purpose. This retort fails because it is clear from passage (1) that Aristotle is talking about truth-apt imagination being up to us. The example he cites as evidence that imagination is up to us involves crafting mental images and putting them into mnemonic systems. It is clear that Aristotle has in mind not just an object of contemplation as such, but a likeness of something external. This means that Aristotle considers truth-apt imagination to be up to us. The reading under discussion suggests otherwise, which is reason to reject it.

We see that, if one takes Aristotle to be deploying a conception of thin truth-aptness in his reasoning, then there is little prospect for the argument. We have surveyed a broad range of interpretations and all of them have failed on more or less obvious grounds. We need a new way to read the passage.

IV. *Thick Truth-aptness*

The traditional reading attempts to show how the fact that belief is thinly truth-apt implies that it is not up to us. It fails because there is no way to connect truth-values as such to Mental Command over a faculty or state. Even if the reading is allowed additional premises, such as Themistius' claim that what is obvious compels our assent, it runs up against Aristotle's other apparent views. Thin truth-aptness, I conclude, cannot bridge the gap in Aristotle's lacunose reasoning. In its place, I propose that Aristotle is deploying a thick notion of truth-aptness in his argument. Not only must belief have a truth-value, but its function requires that it have one truth-value as opposed to another. In other words, people forming beliefs aim for the truth and seek to avoid falsehood. This orientation to the truth imposes certain rules and restrictions on the belief-forming enterprise, and those restrictions render us unable to belief what we want, when we want.

First, let us see how this proposal fits passage (1). As written, the subject of the verbs "to be true or false" is left implicit. In the first half of (1), Aristotle says that imagination is up to us, then backs that up by citing something that we are capable of, such as forming mental images. It makes sense, then, that Aristotle back up his claim that

has no representational content. Lorenz, however, rightly points out (2006, p. 159) that even states which do not purport to represent any actual thing nonetheless have some representational content.

belief is not up to us with a claim about how we are constrained with respect to belief. The subject of the two verbs, therefore, is probably an understood *êmas*. Rather than “[belief] must be true or false,” then, we might translate the phrase “for we must either arrive at truth or be mistaken.” Another possible rendering is “for we must either make true or false assertions.” This translation is consistent with the traditional reading because it emphasizes the truth-value of the beliefs.²¹ We saw in section III, however, that thin truth-aptness cannot fill in Aristotle’s reasoning in a way that is not obviously flawed or inconsistent with his other express views. My proposed reading, then, is preferable. Nothing in the Greek requires a translation that suggests thin truth-aptness, and my translation preserves a likely parallelism of Aristotle’s premises. I propose it because it makes clear that what is at stake is the process by which subjects form beliefs. The process is regulated because it aims at the truth in a way that imagination, supposition and other “free-wheeling” mental states do not.

Aristotle does not mention a normative connection to truth in passage (1), but the original problem was that he gives hardly any argument at all in passage (1). To confirm my proposal, we must look to his other remarks on belief. There is ample independent evidence that Aristotle thinks there is a normative connection between belief and truth. In the *De Anima*, Aristotle draws an analogy between theoretical thought and practical thought, by putting true and false in the same family as good and bad:

(6) And when it says that here is something pleasant or painful, in that case it flees or pursues and in general performs a single action.²² And what is without action, i.e. the true and the false, is in the same family (*genos*) as the good and the bad. (*On the Soul* 3.7.431b8-11)

In the practical case, someone finds something pleasant or painful, and so pursues or avoids it.²³ The true and the false, which are not concerned with action, are in the same family as the good and the bad. The good is an uncontroversial example of something normative; all actions aim at it, for Aristotle.²⁴ Aristotle’s remark in passage (6) suggests, then, that truth is also normative.²⁵ By this analogy, we would expect thoughts and beliefs to aim at truth, since actions aim at the good.

This is exactly the view that we find elsewhere. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle claims truth to be the right condition of various forms of thought:

(7) Of reasoning (*dianoia*) which is theoretical and neither practical nor productive the right and wrong conditions (*to eu kai kakôs*) are the true and the false (for this is the function of everything concerned with reasoning). (6.2.1139a27-29)

21 The assertions are not verbal items, but rather the thoughts which the verbal items follow. See *On Interpretation* 14.23a33-5 for this view of assertoric thought.

22 Reading *hen praxeî* with Jannone (1966, p. 86).

23 This view of the causes of action is simplistic by Aristotle’s own lights (see, for instance, *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.4.1113b1-2), and is probably made so to illustrate the relevant structure of thought, namely that we use our present sensory and mental images to deliberate about the future.

24 See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.1.1094a1-5.

25 Hamlyn’s view (1968, p. 148) that this *merely* means that truth and goodness line up on the same side of a table of opposites seems to me implausibly sparse. Hicks (1907, pp. 540-541) hits nearer the mark when he observes that Aristotle’s grouping in *Metaphysics* 12.7.1072a29-36 would put truth alongside “what is choice-worthy in itself.” Rodier’s (1900, p. ii.515) remarks on theoretical and practical thinking are insightful but do not seem to explain the relevant analogy.

The measure of well-functioning (*to eu*) for thought that is not immediately concerned with action or production is whether it is true or not. Thought is supposed to be true, and it is going wrong (*kakôs*) when it is false. One might object that Aristotle is talking about *dianoia* in passage (7) and not *doxa*, and thereby question the relevance of (7) for the argument. Such an objection is misguided: *dianoia*, or discursive reasoning, is intimately connected with belief.²⁶ It is clear that Aristotle is not using the term in a wide enough sense to encompass *nous* and *epistêmê*, because these kinds of cognition are always true, while (7) clearly refers to false *dianoia*. The process he has in mind, then, is the one that results in belief, not knowledge or any higher epistemic achievement.

Three Bekker pages later, we see confirmation that he is indeed talking about belief. There, Aristotle says that the right condition (*orthotês*) of belief is truth. Of note is his claim that, though belief has truth as a right condition, knowledge has no right condition at all:

(8) But since one who deliberates poorly makes a mistake, and one who does it well gives correct advice, it is clear that good council is a kind of correctness, but a correctness neither of knowledge or belief; for there is no correctness of knowledge (for there is not error for it), while the correctness of belief is truth. (6.9.1142b7-11)

Nothing counts as the right condition for knowledge, because there is no such thing as failure for knowledge. Knowledge is already a success; it always arrives at truth. To speak of it going wrong makes no sense. This is further evidence of the normative relationship between belief and truth. Aristotle only speaks of correctness for a certain state when there can also be wrongness. Since the *orthotês* of belief is the truth, it follows that falsehood is its *hamartia*. This is to say that a false belief is a failed or wrong belief, one that is to be corrected.²⁷

We must now examine how this normative connection to truth regulates belief in a way that makes it not up to us. We start with an instructive parallel: perception, which Aristotle says is not up to us because it requires certain conditions external to us:

(9) The explanation is that perception in its active role is of particulars, but scientific knowledge (*epistêmê*) is of universals, and these are somehow in the soul itself. For this reason thinking is up to a person, whenever he wants, but perception is not up to him; for it is necessary that a perceptible object be there. (*On the Soul* 2.5.417b22-4)

It is not up to us to perceive things because there must be a perceptible present in order for any state that we're in to count as a perception of that thing. The perceptible objects are, in other words, "exterior" to us (2.5.417b28). I can have a visual experience of a little red wagon, but if there is no little red wagon around, then that experience is not a

26 *On Interpretation* 14.23a33-5, *Posterior Analytics* 2.19.100b, *On the Soul* 3.3.427b10-6, *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.9.1142b12-5. All of these passages suggest that *dianoia* is a process by which beliefs (among other alethic states) are formed. The *Ethics* passage especially suggests that *dianoia* is a kind of search which terminates in belief, which is an assertion of what the search has discovered.

27 It is still, however, a belief. Plato, in the *Theaetetus*, worries over the very possibility of false belief. It cannot be a belief in what is not, for that would not be a belief (189a6-b2). He rejects this line of reasoning as paradoxical, but worries about it up to 193c. There, he has Socrates claim that false belief involves a mismatch between perception and thought, a view which he admits has its own problems (193a9-b1, 196a-b). Aristotle locates falsehood in the relation between thought and the world; beliefs fail when they do not match up, but it counts as a belief so long as it "tries" to match.

perception of a little red wagon, and I have no say in the matter. There is nothing normative about this constraint; it says merely that perception cannot happen without certain material preconditions. The story gets more complicated with belief, because it does not require that its object be present when the subject forms a belief about it.²⁸ For instance, I might believe that my roommate is home because I see the light go on under his door, or because another roommate tells me. On top of this, we can have beliefs about universals, which do not causally interact with us. My belief that all melancholic men benefit from a certain treatment is caused by a build-up of conceptually-structured memory that forms experience and finally a grasp of universals.²⁹ It is not caused by the universal itself. In short, the object of belief does not cause belief the way an object of perception causes perception. The parallel is apt, however, because the origins of belief nonetheless lie outside of the believer, otherwise they would be “in the soul” and belief would be up to us, just like thinking. So what brings about belief?

My proposal is that *reasons* bring about belief. In *On the Soul* 3.3, Aristotle says that beliefs require a process of persuasion, which only a rational creature can undergo:

(10) Furthermore, every belief implies conviction, conviction implies *having been persuaded (to pepeisthai)*, and persuasion implies reason. (3.3.428a22-4)

A full account of the operations of reason in Aristotle is beyond this discussion, and I have as yet nothing that comes close. All we need to say, however, is that reason is a rule-governed faculty whose operation results in belief, among other states. In forming a belief, an agent makes herself answerable to certain norms of rational evaluation. This presupposes the possibility that the belief is mistaken and must be corrected. Aristotle says that one who has belief must be more cautious than someone who knows:

(11) If people do not understand but rather form beliefs, they must pay much more attention to the truth, just as someone who is sick must pay more attention to health than someone who is healthy; for someone who has a belief, compared to someone who understands, does not have a healthy disposition regarding the truth. (*Metaphysics* 4.4.1008b27-31)

Part of what it means to form beliefs is to be on the lookout for reasons to revise or update one’s beliefs. People who claim to believe that p, yet form those “beliefs” without regard for reasons for or against, are not really forming beliefs, but rather are doing something else, like engaging in supposition or imagination. In the same respect, people who claim to be perceiving something when that something is not there to be perceived are doing something other than perception. Belief is not up to us because the way we must point our belief to aim it at the truth—that is, what counts as a reason for or against any belief—depends not at all on our desires or actions. We can bring it about that p, but we cannot bring it about that p is a reason to believe that q. When Aristotle says in passage (1) that “we must either arrive at truth or be mistaken,” he is gesturing at the relationship between forming a belief and being rationally compelled to revise it under certain circumstances.

If my interpretation succeeds, then we have our explanation for why belief’s

28 See *On Interpretation* 11.21a32-3, *Topics* 4.1.121a22-4, *On Memory* 1.449b10-11 for passages where Aristotle claims that belief does not require the presence of its object.

29 See *Posterior Analytics* 2.19.100z4-9 for this view, and (Gregoric & Grgic, 2006) and (LaBarge, 2006) for discussion.

relation to truth precludes its being up to us. We also avoid the counterexamples that the traditional reading is prey to. The functions of imagination do not require that our imaginings be true, or even attempt to track the truth. When faced with some reason that not-*p*, a person has no obligation to cease imagining that *p*. The same is true for supposition. We assume things for all kinds of reasons, only one of which is that we think they might be true. It is fine in general to say “I know that [not-*p*], but anyway suppose that [*p*],” and reason from there. Nor can brainwashing falsify this argument: someone who determines the content of their mental states through means other than rational evaluation no longer counts as forming beliefs.

V. Conclusion

Aristotle’s argument in passage (1) is difficult because he gives us very little to go on. All interpretations must supplement and conjecture based on what he says in other contexts about our faculties and mental states. I hope to have provided an interpretation of passage (1) that synthesizes a broad range of data about Aristotle’s background theory of beliefs, Mental Command and mental states. A reading in terms of thick truth-aptness is not the most obvious reading, but I hope to have shown that it has legitimate claim on being the most coherent and comprehensive.

A closing remark: if my interpretation is correct, and principled rational cognition is partially constitutive of belief formation, then there is urgent need for an understanding of rational cognition in Aristotle that encompasses more than his account of lofty epistemic achievements like *nous* and *episteme* in the *Analytics* and elsewhere. Aristotle’s view of human rationality is much richer than narrow concentration on those works would suggest, and more detailed work said view cannot come soon enough.

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